

THE BIRD PAINTER IN TIME OF WAR

by Carol Emshwiller

Carol Emshwiller takes a painful look at the collateral damage sustained by innocents like...

I paint birds in enemy territory. I risk my life to paint them. My people are desert people. They think I've made the birds up—that I'm painting fairy tales just so I can sell them to the gullible. I don't think I could invent such fancy birds by myself. So far I've only been able to smuggle some feathers to prove to my own people that there do, indeed, exist birds of a beauty they've never even thought of.

The enemy farmers know I'm a foreigner but they don't guess where I'm from. I ask, with some of their words and with drawings, if such and such a bird is around. I pay them in pictures. I don't have any of their kind of money. I don't even have my own kind. That would be a sure giveaway.

If their soldiers catch me, they'll take me for a spy. They'll think my paintings full of secret messages. Who cares about birds? they'd say. And they'd be right. Who does? Not very many in any country.

I doubt if I'd have the energy or the will to defend myself. I stutter. Even more so when I'm nervous. The birds don't care. I can imitate their calls. I can whistle, squawk, quack and squeak. I'm good at those, no problem.

I eat what comes to hand but I won't eat birds. I can usually find tree ears or chanterelles and there are roots. But I won't eat quail or duck or sage hen as most do. I do eat fish and crayfish.

I used to photograph wars, but that was before I looked up, not for the hiss of a mortar but for a different, exciting sound, and there, in long lines, were the snow geese flying north.

That was a long time ago, and an entirely different war.

I prefer the people here where I don't talk their language that well. Then not talking is normal. A silent cup of tea with gestures. A place by the fire on a rainy night. These people are not great talkers, anyway. I and the farmer can sit and smoke and nod, his wife and children nearby, happy, or so it seems, for each other's silent company.

If I see a good barn I may not even ask. I may just bed down there

secretly. Of course there'll be a dog, but I'm good with dogs. I always sit a bit before imposing myself on their space. Sometimes I manage to get out a series of Gs. Guh, guh, ghu, ghu, good dog.

Children ask what's wrong with me. I always say, "L, I, I, *lots* of things."

To avoid detection, when I leave my desert for their mountains, I always cross the border where the cliffs are steep and the forest thick. It's not easy with my folio and sketch books on my back.

After climbing the ridge, I'll hit the road to the village. I never get far. I'm always looking down at the plants along the roadside, as much as I look up to see what's flying by. I don't bother with the names of either birds or plants. Words are my adversaries. Besides, the names will be different in their language.

It's the perfect time of year. All sorts of birds are passing through. Half way up the hills on their side of the border, I stop, turn around and rest. I can see the tops of the flags that fly from their fort just below me. I'm well past their lines. From now on I'll just look like one more farmer with a big bundle.

But there's not a single bird call nor rustle of ground squirrels. I hold still—just as everything else does. I hear the snap of twigs. Something's happening just above the fort.

Then I see soldiers in the colors of my own side, circling past not far below me. They're going to hit from behind, where the cliffs look down on the fort. They'll drop mortars right into the central courtyard.

These days forts aren't worth much. I don't think the enemy uses this one for anything but barracks. Those cannons along the ramparts are a hundred years old. I heard reveille as I passed by. The enemy will be there. My side could do a lot of damage.

I wonder if I should try to warn the enemy. What would save the most bloodshed?

I climb higher, wondering what to do.

But then I hear a sound from above. I stop again. Hold still...

...and a soldier backs up right into me. This time a soldier of the enemy, looking down on those skulking soldiers of my own side. He's

alone, but loaded down with rifle and grenades.

At first I think a boy and I think, does the enemy use children as its soldiers? But I start to suspect. I look down at her body.

She sees my look. “Yes,” she says, in the enemy language, “I am,” and points her gun at my chest. “What are you doing out here? Trying to sneak across the border?”

Exactly what I *am* doing. Of course what I answer is my usual. “I, I, I, I, I.”

“What’s in your bundle?”

I hand it to her. She moves away, tries to keep her gun on me and open the bundle at the same time. Not easy.

Then she forgets all about the gun. She even forgets about me.

I have two smaller paintings I brought with me to trade for a meal, or a bed in case the weather turns bad. One is of the bird I call a golden wing. The other is of a pair of black and white longtails with red heads. I tried to capture the luminosity of their throats. There are flowers in each painting. People like that. In one there’s dew on the petals and a sunrise in the background. They’re not completely realistic. After all, I was a photographer, I got tired of reality.

She can’t stop looking. Ten ... maybe fifteen minutes. I sit down. Later she turns to me, a look of wonder on her face. All she says is, “You!”

I nod.

She sits beside me, the paintings at our feet. She gives three big sighs in a row, says, “I’d like to forget all about the war. I’d like to run away and never come back.”

I keep nodding. I don’t want to have to try to say anything.

She looks at me again—all admiration. “Easy to see you’re not a soldier.”

Then she looks at the signature.

My name will tell her I’m a foreigner.

“Nor. Nor? Where’s that from?”

I took that name from the word for bird in my language.

I don’t lie. “I, I’m yu, yu, your ... enemy.”

“Not *my* enemy.”

Her eyes are greenish blue.

Then, below us, the bombardment begins. My people against her people.

She picks up her rifle. She’s about to take off, but I grab her arm.

“N, n, n, nothing you can d....”

A trumpet sounds down in the fort.

“You’re trying to save them.”

“No. S, s, save....*you!*”

But she twists away and off she goes.

I pack up my paintings and head up. I want to be back where the birds are singing. I need to paint. It calms me.

I don’t stop until the sound is muffled and distant and until I start to hear birds again and the rustle of ground creatures.

I get out my sketch pad and a crow quill pen and sit, hardly moving. And soon, here comes a redheaded yellowbeak with topknot and right behind him his drab but, in her own way, equally beautiful mate. I start to sketch, then give each drawing a wash of watercolor, wait a few minutes until they dry and pack up.

I was concentrating so hard I didn’t notice that the distant explosions have stopped, though there’s a volley of rifle shots now and then.

I climb out on a jutting rock. I’m almost at the top of the cliff. Behind me is the high flat land of the enemy. I watch the sun setting across the valley where my people live. I watch a flock of snow geese fly by. I hear

them. They're low, getting ready to land for the night. I watch until even the stragglers pass. Then I climb below the jutting rock and lie down.

I wonder how things went at the fort and with the girl. I wonder if she's still alive or if she rushed in, threw her grenades and was shot right away. I hope she had more sense.

Can a mere bird painter rescue somebody? Especially a bird painter who can hardly talk?

I feel bad that I let myself spend the afternoon sketching—making myself forget while others were in danger and maybe pain ... of course it's pain they've gotten themselves into. Even she. But the joy on her face when she looked at my paintings! And then at me! It's enough to make me fall in love. But I don't ever let myself. How could I say what needs to be said? With secret signs and hand signals? A wink? A leer? Maybe with a parrot on my shoulder to talk for me in squawks? I refuse.

Besides, I have my birds.

But could I rescue?

I give up on sleeping.

I can at least see if she made it down to her own people. After I find out, I'll escape back to my solitude.

* * * *

I leave my bundle under the jutting rock. No moon. There's an owl. That reassures me. I disturb things that skitter away. Then I trip and fall flat. Branches scratch my face. I hit my chin on a rock and almost knock myself out. There's a mini landslide. I make a terrible racket. I lie still and listen.

Nothing.

But right after that, my own side captures me. They don't treat me very well. Before they ask me anything or try to find out who I am, they throw me down and kick me a few times. Then bring me to a bonfire and to a colonel. I stutter more than usual. I don't make any sense at all. They take me for a moron—it's not the first time—and chain me to a tree.

I'm worried about my paintings and sketchbooks under that overhang (they're not well hidden), but I'm mostly worried about the girl. I don't even

know her name. I can't ask about her. But then I can't ask about her anyway. They don't have time to listen to me trying to get the words out.

* * * *

In the morning I open my eyes to white feathers. A fog of white. Tiny bits of down. I'm hurting and stiff but I'm charmed. Enchanted. It's as if I've found my way into a bird world. I sit up and then I realize there's nothing to be enchanted about.

Every little group of soldiers has a campfire with a spit and something cooking. The battle was long over, but that evening they had nothing else to shoot so they shot the snow geese as they came down low, looking for a resting place.

They eat and then bring me their leftovers, but, hungry as I am, I won't eat snow goose.

Finally they unchain me, bring me down to the ruined fort where they've set up headquarters. The outer walls still stand, but inside it's a mess. The inner walls are stone, too, but the roofs were mostly wood and they're splintered and broken. Everything in the rooms is scattered and covered with debris.

They have ways of hurting that don't leave a mark. If I could think of a secret I'd try to tell it to them, but I never pay attention to anything except birds and flowers. And the more I need to talk, the worse my sputtering gets. I find myself making the bird sounds that come to me so easily, quacks and screeches and squawks.

Afterwards they don't bother tying me up. They let me lie in the courtyard. Discarded. Soldiers walk back and forth around me and don't pay any attention.

* * * *

Later I hear somebody calling, "Nor, Nor. Get up, Nor. Please. Can you get up?"

It's dusk. The fort is quiet. Quieter than it should be, not a soldier in sight. It seems the army has left for some other battle.

"Nor."

I know who it is.

I stand up and hobble over to a tiny window in a stone wall. She reaches out. I grab her hand. Without thinking I kiss it and then hold it to my cheek. Then I worry about what I've done, but she reaches with her other hand and places it over my hand. Perhaps words aren't so necessary after all.

"Are y, y, you aw...."

"What have they done to you? You look...."

I'm thinking: Nothing you can see, but then I remember my bruised chin and scratched face from my fall.

"They've gone," she says. "Can you let me out?"

The door is chained shut, but I use a piece of debris as a crow bar and pry the hinges out.

We run out the broken gates, around the fort, and start up behind it. I'm yet again climbing the cliffs at the hardest place. I know the way well but now I'm hurting. I wonder if I have a cracked rib.

* * * *

It's exactly under that jutting rock where I hid my things that we finally stop, and there's my bundle, slashed. Everything scattered. My paintings are not only cut, but shot at. I suppose the next best thing to shooting real birds is shooting paintings of them. They burned the sketch books. Just the metal rings are left. They cooked another snow goose there.

I sit down, discouraged. It's the girl that yells, "Oh no! Oh no!" over and over. She runs around gathering up pieces and trying to fit them back together.

I say, "D, d, don't."

She says, "But I want these. Can I have them?"

I shrug.

I sit beside the dead campfire, while the girl, on her knees, keeps trying to piece together parts of the paintings and I finally remember to ask

her name. It's Milla. I think it means cloud. It fits her.

She keeps looking up at me with the same admiration as before and I realize I've done it—I've actually rescued her. If not for me coming down for her, who would have been there to let her out?

She pieces together about half of one of my paintings. The middle is full of bullet holes and cuts.

"Look. The sunset and the flock of ducks in the distance is still there. I want it. Please."

"C, c, 'course."

"Except you could sell this as it is."

"No. You c, c."

"But what can I do for you that would be worth as much?"

"N, n, no."

Then we hear honking way above us. Another batch of geese, but high. You can just barely hear them.

Then there's gunfire below us. None of the geese fall, they're way too high. Somebody is shooting just for the fun of it. It stops after the geese pass, but the shooters are so near, we think we'd better get out of there.

But they've heard us. They start shooting in our direction before they know which side we are, or we them. We flop down flat.

But it might be my own side.

I stand up. I shout, "S, s, stop," in my own language.

Behind me Milla shouts, "Stop," in her language.

Good. We have both languages going. Then one of them says, "Stop," in the enemy's language. It's Milla's people.

Right in front of me, and in flower, is the bush the hummingbirds love best, and there, the hummingbird. How can it be? Right between shots? I still have a red feather in my button hole. I don't know how it lasted here

through all this. The bird hovers over it. I stand still. It hovers over my face. Checking, am I food or not? Perhaps my scratches are red enough to tempt it.

I come to, to someone crying. I'm comfortable. There's a pillow. There's a feather bed. I think: Some day there will be nothing to cry about. Or at least there'll be no shooting and plenty of feather beds. Then I think: *Hummingbird!*

I open my eyes and sit up.

The crying stops.

There's a little girl standing in the doorway. She says, "Oh!" And then, in the enemy language, "I thought you were dead."

I'm not a good judge of children's ages, but she can't be more than six or seven.

I say, "N, n, not yet."

She says, "You had blood."

"D, did I?"

"You stayed in bed all day. I wouldn't like that."

"I, I, I...."

"You talk funny."

"I, I ... Yup."

"They didn't want me to see you but I did anyway. Lots of times. Like now. You're a secret. But how come you get all these nice things?"

"Wh, what? N, nice?"

Then I see, beside the bed, there are sketch books, pens, and paints, and a large tablet of watercolor paper.

"I wish / could have them. Or even just one little bitty thing."

"Which?"

“Paints.”

“I ... I’ll ... share.”

Then Milla comes in, carrying a tray.

“Sassuna! What are you doing here?”

She’s wearing slacks and a flowery blouse. Everything much more revealing than her uniform.

“He said he’d share.”

“Go!”

The girl is so happy she actually skips out.

“I hope she didn’t wake you.”

“I ... I ... like....”

She puts the tray on a little table by the bed.

I try to get up and fall flat. Bang my chin yet again, knock over the tray—the tea, the bread—in a great clatter.

But she’s kneeling beside me. I’m in her arms.

Again I’m thinking: Maybe words aren’t that important.

Sassuna must have heard everything crashing down. She’s back. As before she says, “Oh!” Stands in the doorway watching us.

Milla kisses my forehead and then my cheeks. I reach up to hold her head so I can kiss her lips.

Sassuna keeps on looking. We keep right on kissing.

* * * *

Milla tells me the soldiers of my side are entering houses hunting for soldiers of their side. They’re killing animals to eat and killing animals for fun. The place is overrun by *us*. So far they haven’t come here. This farm is

set well back from the main road and hidden in trees.

I was shot in the thigh. Another shot creased my ribs under my arm. When I fell I fell hard and hit my head.

After they shot me, Milla's side apologized to her. They even helped carry me out to the road, but refused to do more. They thought my side was right behind them. Milla found an old man with a cart and had him haul me here.

There's an old lady here (Sassuna's grandmother) and a boy who sleeps in the barn and helps out. They know I rescued Milla and she showed them the pieces of my paintings. Boasted about me. Only Sassuna doesn't look at me as if I was special. She says she can draw and paint just as well as I can. I say we'll go out and paint as soon as I'm well enough. Of course I don't say it as easily as that but Sassuna waits for me to sputter it out.

* * * *

Later they wheel me into the yard to paint and soon we hike the fields and orchard. Milla comes, too. She likes to sit behind my left shoulder and watch my paintings grow, little by little by little.

Everything we paint is hung up in the main room right away, mine and Sassuna's side by side.

Now, to everybody's exasperation, Sassuna limps and stutters as much as I do. Nobody can stop her.

Sassuna says, if she was a bird, she'd like to be the red and blue one with the topknot. I say I'd like to be a crow or raven because they're clever and tricky.

And Milla and I....

Sassuna's grandmother lets us do as we do without disapproval.

Neither of us talk much. Touch is how we love each other.

* * * *

But they come. My side. In the middle of the night, of course. They take me and Milla.

I can't explain anything, even in my own language, but I don't want to. I want to go with Milla. Milla tells them I'm on their side, but they don't believe her.

I'm still wearing my shirt and pants with bullet holes. Bullet holes in civilian clothes means to them I'm worse than a soldier, I'm a spy. They think my stuttering is a ruse. Or, they think, I was picked to be a spy because I couldn't divulge secrets when tortured.

They tie us up and throw us in a truck bed and drive us back to the old fort. I have a kind of fit. I *will* not let this happen. I refuse. I struggle. Milla keeps yelling for me to stop. "It won't do any good." At the end of twenty minutes I'm exhausted.

They lock the others near the gate but they take me to a cell on the far side of the fort. I'm in a room with hardly space enough for a cot. And there's no cot. In fact there's nothing. There's a barred window in the door just big enough for somebody to look in and see if I'm still here.

There are ravens all over the yard. Perhaps the bombing scattered garbage.

One comes to my tiny window, pecks at the bars. "Hello," he says. And then, "Fire in the hole. Boom."

I caw and then coo. I'm thinking: Go tell my love I love her. I say, "I, I ... t, t, tell her I, I..." And shoo him away. He says, "Goodbye," and does a barrel roll before flying off. It cheers me up.

I kick aside chunks of plaster and pieces of a beam and lie down on the earth floor and look at the half ruined ceiling. Could I pull it apart even more and escape? There's nothing to stand on to reach it. Maybe at the door, perching on the lintel? I leap up the wall but fall flat. I do it again.

When I was young I took needless risks in order to test myself. Perhaps it was because I couldn't talk. I had to prove myself some way. I'd stay out in a cold rain without a raincoat. I'd climb the hardest cliffs, and climb higher and longer than anybody else. I was a pacifist, but I went to photograph wars to prove myself as brave as any soldier. I thought I had gotten over that need.

But I leap up the wall yet again and fall flat, as if hurting myself proved something.

I'm about ready to have another fit.

I calm myself by imagining Milla yelling, Stop. I lie down, and study the ceiling again. Finally I doze.

Evening comes. No one brings food or water.

I watch out my little window. There's a mortar launcher set up in the yard, but nobody near it. Soldiers are walking about now and then, though not as many as you'd think if they're serious about holding the fort. Just enough to look after the prisoners—which they're not doing, at least as far as food and drink is concerned. I wonder if Milla got fed.

I call out a couple of times but nobody pays attention. Crazy man, stuttering out consonants. "P, p, p, p, please," like a motorboat that won't start.

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At dark the bombing begins. This time it will be Milla's people trying to get their fort back. What's the sense of all this back and forth? This fort isn't worth much to either side. When they win it what will they have won?

At the next volley my roof collapses. Thank goodness there wasn't much of it left to fall on me. One of the beams lies wedged, half way down, and at an angle. I can reach it and climb out.

Mortars are falling everywhere. As I watch, the mortar launcher in the yard is blasted apart.

And then her side does an old-fashioned thing. They shoot arrows wrapped with burning rags into the broken wooden roofs. It only takes a minute for smoke to cover everything. Soldiers run around choking and yelling.

All I think about is Milla. I run through the smoke to where she was locked up but when I get there, the door is lying on its side burning. I try to go in but I can't walk over the fallen and burning ceiling and I can't see in all the smoke. I call out. Nobody answers.

But I'm the only one they thought was a spy. Maybe they let her go. Or could she have knocked the door down, or maybe got out through the roof as I did before it burned?

Would she have left without me? She might. She might have been thinking of Sassuna and Grandma.

I head for the gate.

But their side is picking off the soldiers as they run out. No questions asked—as usual.

I pull my shirt up around my face and turn back into the smoke.

I get lost right away. I fall. Then I hear, “Hello. Hello.”

I caw.

“Hello there. Fire in the hole. Boom.”

I’ve always trusted birds.

I get up and run, following that crazy, raucous voice.

“Hello. Hello there.”

Just when I think I can’t take one more smoky breath, there I am, bumping into the back wall of the fort, suffocating and nowhere to go. But there’s an impatient, “craw, craw, craw,” from somewhere near me. I turn towards the crawling and feel a gust of fresh air. There’s a narrow stone doorway and a stone stairway just inside. It’s not smoky in there. The air is cool and smells of mold. I climb the steps for what seems like three stories and end up high on the ancient battlements. The wind is blowing in the other direction. The rest of the fort is completely hidden in smoke but I’m in the clear.

Back here, the battlements are right against the cliff. The ancient cannons can’t have been of any use at all, and yet there’s one every ten or twelve steps. For Heaven’s sake, facing the cliff! As if to follow some military rule that said, in all forts, it must be so.

The raven is perched on one of the cannons.

Then the fire hits the arsenal. The whole front of the fort blows up.

We—raven and I—are far enough back and high enough not to be hurt by debris, but we’re both knocked down. I’m on my back and the raven

... at first I think he's dead, splayed out flat, feathers every which way, but he gets up and flutters to shake his feathers back in place.

"Fire in the hole. Boom."

"Ex, ex ... actly."

He starts to preen, trying to put himself back together.

This section of the fort is all that's left. Not much use now, even as a prison.

I hear a squawking and look in the mouth of the cannon and there's a nest and three baby ravens in there. They're not even dusty. When they see me peering in, they squawk louder. All you can see are three wide open red mouths.

I make a fluttering sound in the back of my throat. "Rroo, rroo, rroo," trying to imitate the sounds parents make to their chicks. I sit down beside the cannon.

Some things, even fragile things, still live and thrive. But Milla? Is she part of this dust billowing around us? Am I breathing her?

What if I hadn't made it this far before that blast? What if I...? Blown to bits, too, flying, as maybe Milla is flying around me right now.

I have wished I could fly.

I don't want to be birds made of a hundred little bits. Unless Milla....

The raven hops up on the side of the cliff.

"Hello. Boom! Hello. Boom!" As if telling me to follow.

But only fingerholds and toeholds here. If that. Does he think I'm a mountain goat? Or does he think I, too, can fly?

But I've lost all fear for my own safety. I have nothing else to lose and nothing to do but trust my raven.

Now he's even higher.

"Crox. Creeks. Crow. Boom!"

I find a tiny fingerhold. I begin.

* * * *

Without my raven's repertoire of caws and cricks and buzzes and booms, I'd not have had the guts to do it. He gives me confidence and, even in the midst of all this, amuses me. If such a creature still talks and crows his way through life, his chicks on the very edge of disaster—if he tries to help me for no reason whatsoever, it must be worth hanging on ... and literally hanging on.

I thought maybe with my wounded leg I wouldn't be able to do it ... that I'd end up flat out beside the chicks. Good food for carrion crows. At least I'd end up of some use.

It gets easier. In a few minutes I'm back on the wooded pathways I usually travel. Cinders fly up around me, some as white and magical as the feathers of the snow geese. I grab at them but they're as elusive as down.

I turn around. I want to circle to the gates of the fort and try to find out what happened to Milla.

My raven calls, "Hello. Hello. Hello."

I keep going.

He flies into my face.

In spite of a face full of feathers, I keep going back.

He dive bombs my head.

"Aw, r, r, right," and turn around. "D, d, d, *damn!*"

I don't believe this. Birds are smart in their own way, but not in our ways.

He leads me up my usual pathway. We don't go far when I see a small bundle wrapped in red cloth and partly covered in leaves and brush.

The raven coos—as if to his chicks.

It isn't! But it is!

I squat beside her. "S, s, s, Sa, suna!"

She sits up and grabs me so hard she knocks me over.

I never saw such a sad, pale, dirty, tear-streaked face. Ever.

"I couldn't find you. I couldn't find Milla."

Has she been out here all night?

"H ... how? How long?"

She starts to cry. By the looks of her I wouldn't have thought she had the energy.

"And then I couldn't get back home."

"Fire in the hole. Boom! Hello."

"It, it, 's all right n, now."

"Don't go."

"C, 'course not."

When I look up to see where the raven's got to, he's gone.

We'll have to hurry back. The night will be cold. Sassuna only has her jacket and I have nothing but my shirt. I take it off and wrap it around her, tie it on by the sleeves. I put her piggyback and start on up. My body will help to warm her.

I've climbed up and down here so often, and with a big bundle of paper and paints. Sassuna isn't much heavier.

What a dangly age she is, nothing but arms and legs.

"Nor."

"Mmm hmm."

"I love you."

As I was following the raven up the cliff, I had thought to find a way to get myself blown to bits or burned to ashes—anything that would take wing, but I guess not. At least not yet.

She falls asleep there on my back and drools on my shoulder. As evening comes it does get cold and me with no shirt. It'll take another couple of hours before I can find my way back to Grandma's.

But my leg wound and lack of food catches up with me. I stop under the overhanging rock. Just one more short climb and we'll be up where it's flat and easy, but I have to rest. I put Sassuna down next to the dead fire where Milla and I sat side by side and she tried to put my paintings back together.

I'm freezing. I gather up wood and brush, make a small fire and lie down beside it.

I think of those raven chicks, right on the edge of war, and the hummingbird there, practically between shots. Why can't some of us resign from all sides? Fly over it. Not even be bothered? Build our nests above it all?

I wake to shooting. Sassuna and I are caught between it. She cries out in panic.

"Shhh. Shhh. B, b, b, be a bird."

"How?"

And now my words come out perfectly. No hesitation.

"Remember the shiny red and blue one you wanted to be? Be it."

Shots are all around from both above us and below. A grenade lands next to us, right where the cinders still....

* * * *

I rise, a shiny red and blue bird beside me. There's a great rush of wings as a flock of ravens rises up with us.

"Hello. Hello. Hello."

